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MORRIS WORKSHOP

MOLLY DANCING IN SOUTH-WEST CAMBRIDGESHIRE

by Russell Wortley and Cyril Papworth

"Molly dancing" is understood throughout Cambridgeshire as synonymous with morris dancing. Both terms are used, but the former much more commonly, to designate this traditional mid-winter ritual held variously on Plough Monday or Boxing Day.

In south-west Cambridgeshire the molly dancers appeared annually on Plough Monday, the first Monday after Twelfth Day, and local newspaper reports indicate that the custom was flourishing in the mid-19th century. By the end of the century, however, few sets of molly dancers remained active and by 1930 most surviving dancers were in their seventies or eighties. The information which follows on the dances performed and the dress of the dancers was derived mainly from William Papworth of Comberton (grandfather to one of the present authors) who died in 1946 aged 93 and Joseph Kester of Hardwick who died at the age of 102 in 1950 and had taken the part of the "Lady" in the Hardwick set.

In this part of Cambridgeshire each set of molly dancers consisted of six or eight dancers, the first couple, the "Lord" and "Lady," being more elaborately attired than the others; one musician (fiddler or concertina player); two cadgers with collecting boxes; and (in wet or snowy weather) an umbrella-man to shield the musician. Apart from the "Lady," who was dressed "just like a lady" with long skirt and hat with veil, "the best he could get hold of," the dancers all wore a four inch wide coloured sash over the left shoulder, the ends hanging down a short distance at the right hip, a broad waist-band, broad arm ribbons round the upper arms and narrow ribbons of mixed colours round the crown of the hat and hanging down on one side. The colour of the sash varied from village to village (e.g. dark red at Madingley, white with half-inch red crimped edgings at Hardwick); the waist-band was often the same colour as the sash, but if different this and the arm ribbons had to match for all members of a set. Rosettes were stitched to the broad ribbons—on the front of the sash, on the waist-band and on the arm ribbons—and a large rosette was worn at the right hip; small rosettes were attached to the lallygags¹. All these ribbons were worn over ordinary clothes—buttoned-up jackets of similar colour and dark trousers. The "Lord," usually the tallest of the gang, wore a high hat with feather while the others wore "ordinary hats" (presumably slouch hats). The musician always wore a green sash and coloured hat-band but no other ribbons. The cadgers, who had one or two rosettes pinned to their jackets, customarily carried a large spoon or ladle for collecting the money which was then transferred to a box.

Early in the morning of Plough Monday some of the village women "dressed" the dancers—one or two were reckoned to be particularly good dressers and it was said that it took two women to dress a man, one to hold him still while the other stitched on the rosettes! By seven

¹ called in Norfolk "upcatchers"; straps worn by farm workers round their trouser-legs just below the knee.

o'clock the molly dancers were on their way to a neighbouring village or to Cambridge and after completing their round would return home about 5 p.m. (see E.D.S. Spring 1974, p. 23). After dancing through their own village they had a meal at one of the pubs and the day ended with a village social and dance for all comers.

The dances performed by the molly dancers were the same as the country dances done by mixed company at village socials, harvest suppers and especially at the dances held in the pubs during the annual Feast Week. At Comberton these traditional country dances continued in use during Feast Week for many years after molly dancing had come to an end and came to be known as "Feast dances."

The following are some of the figures danced by the Comberton molly dancers around 1880 to 1900:-

Cross-hand Polka—duple minor. Original tune (E.D.S. Spring, 1974, p. 30).

- A.1. 1st corner half-turn giving r. hand; back with l. hand;
- A.2. 2nd corner the same;
- B.1. 1st couple lead down middle and back to places (walk);
- B.2. Swing and change.

College Hornpipe—triple minor. Original tune.

- A.1. & 2. Hands six, circle left and back (8 change-hop-steps each way);
- B.1. Cast left in couples and back to places, waving handkerchief in free hand;
- B.2. 1st and 2nd couples swing and change.

Special Molly Dance ("Cross Hand")—whole set.

Suggested tune: Bob Ridley-O (see below). One large handkerchief held up between each couple.

- A.1. Partners forward and back ("dodging" right and left) and cross over;
- A.2. Repeat, crossing back to places;
- B. 1st couple down middle under arches, followed by 2nd, 3rd and 4th couples, and "edging" up to original places;
- C. 1st couple swing to bottom of set (*Conjectural*).

Six-hand Reel—triple minor. Tune: The Girl I left behind me.

- A.1. (& 2.) 1st couple cross over and cast down outside set, cross again below 3rd couple and return to places;
- B.1. 1st couple lead down middle and back to places (walk);
- B.2. 1st and 2nd couples swing and change.

Each dance should be repeated until the Lord and Lady regain the top position.

In duple-minor dances the first two couples alone start the dance, the others joining in as the Lord and Lady progress down.

In triple-minor dances the leading couple at the end of their second time through must swing to bottom place.

Except where "walk" is specified the step throughout is the change-hop-step; the strength of "hop" and vigour of dancing varies according to the particular dance and the character of the tune. An upper-arm hold is suggested for swings.

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BOB RIDLEY-O or SHAVE THE DONKEY

Frank Beeton,
Balsham, Cambs.
(R. Wortley, December 1956)

Musical notation for 'Bob Ridley-O or Shave the Donkey'. It consists of three staves of music in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The first staff is labeled 'A' and contains a sequence of notes with a first ending bracket labeled '1' over the final two measures. The second staff is labeled 'B' and contains a sequence of notes with a second ending bracket labeled '2' over the first two measures. The third staff is labeled 'C' and contains a sequence of notes. The music is written in treble clef.

BRICKS AND MORTAR

Following the query answered by Geoff Rye in *Songs under the Microscope*, E. D. and S. Winter, 1977, Gordon Ridgewell has suggested that we should reprint the original article on this dance, from E. D. and S. December, 1945.

Musical notation for 'Bricks and Mortar'. It consists of three staves of music in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The first staff is in common time (C) and contains a sequence of notes. The second staff is in G major and contains a sequence of notes with a repeat sign. The third staff is in G major and contains a sequence of notes. The music is written in treble clef.

This is a relic of the Morris, interesting from the point of view of local tradition and folk survival, but not so valuable from the point of view of a dance.

We have had scraps of information about the dance called "Bricks and Mortar" from Somerset and Wiltshire. They all point to its association with a seasonal feast and a solemn procession. I recollect that one verbal description given to me alluded to the vast rosettes worn by the men, and I believe there was a reference to bells. Now we have a written description by Mr. Richard Shore, of Millards Hill House, Frome, sent to me by Mr. Bonham-Carter, of the dance as performed at the Harvest Home Supper at Whatley.

It was danced by men only, formed up in two rows facing each other.

When the music started they commenced to step dance—this step dance had a peculiar shuffle.

After a time the opposite numbers would change over and go on step dancing.

Then the top couple would turn right and left handed and shuffle and step to the end of the room. They would then stop and hold up their hands. The top couple would now be the bottom couple.

They would then start step dancing again. Each couple in turn getting up to the top, when the dance would finish.

After the old hands had done their dance, youths were put in the dance; no doubt this is how the dance was handed down.

The females would sit round the room and admire the men at their dance.

This description may be lacking in particulars of technical interest, but it conveys very well the general character of the dance and of the festival occasion. The women are watchers.

The youths are initiated as part of the ceremony. The actual structure of the dance is reminiscent of Shepherds Hey, Bampton, "foot up."

I hope that the publishing of Mr. Shore's description of the Whatley dance will bring in some other information about "Bricks and Mortar." The name is assumed to be a corruption of Rakes of Mallow or Rigs O' Marlow, and Mr. Shore's version of the tune might be regarded as such. But it would be interesting to "collect" all the information now available and to see if there is more to it. D.N.K.